

'Hug-a-thug' crowd should read stats

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With the federal Conservatives trying to take some baby steps to toughen Canada's soft-as-butter criminal justice system, the "hug-a-thug" crowd has been in full rant of late.

After all, as we're lectured, ad nauseam, tougher laws would be mere pandering to the public because "the crime rate is going down."

Today, let's examine this claim about the crime rate.

The violent crime rate in Canada today (meaning 2008, the latest available figures) is 321% above what it was in 1962, when comparable figures first started being recorded by Statistics Canada.

Yes, you read that right.

In 1962, there were 221 violent crimes reported to police per 100,000 population. Today the comparable figure is 932 per 100,000, more than a tripling in under 50 years.

For property crime, the rate is 62% higher (3,079 crimes per 100,000 population in 2008, compared to 1,891 in 1962).

The overall crime rate is 137% higher (6,589 crimes per 100,000 population last year compared to 2,771 in 1962).

The reason you keep hearing crime is "down" (along with a newer measurement called "crime severity") is that in the early 1990s, crime rates started dropping all over North America for reasons no one is sure of, although everything from an aging population to more liberal abortion laws (hence, fewer "unwanted" children) have been offered as theories.

However, what we know unequivocally, especially for violent crime, is that these rates have never returned to the much lower ones of the early 1960s.

Back before then Liberal solicitor-general Jean-Pierre Goyer, complaining about the high cost of keeping criminals in prison, advised Parliament in 1971 that: "The present situation results from the fact that (the) protection of society has received more emphasis than the rehabilitation of inmates. Consequently, we have decided from now on to stress the rehabilitation of offenders, rather than the protection of society."

Yes, you read that right. This became the prevailing philosophy of subsequent Liberal and Progressive Conservative governments for decades, to the chagrin of crime victims.

Crime rate

Next, since the official crime rate is based on incidents reported to police, does the reported crime reflect the actual crime rate?

The answer is no. The real crime rate is much higher.

Every five years, Statistics Canada conducts the General Social Survey. It asks a representative sample of Canadians, among other things, whether they have been crime victims.

From the last survey in 2004 (the next one is being conducted now, with the findings to be released next year) Statistics Canada reached the following conclusions.

First, progressively fewer Canadians who are crime victims are reporting the crime to police -- only 34% in 2004, compared to 37% in 1999.

Second, based on the GSS, an estimated 92% of sexual assaults were never reported to police, 46% of break-ins, 51% of motor vehicle/parts thefts, 61% of physical assaults and 54% of robberies.

Yes, you read that right.

The reported crime rate also excludes federal drug offences -- odd, given the huge role drugs play in violent crime -- and Criminal Code traffic offences.

Historically, when a crime involved multiple offences, only the most serious was recorded in the crime rate and, if, say, a street gang assaults you on your way home, that counts as one crime, although there were multiple assailants.

Small wonder the crime rate is going "down," eh?

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